

## University Chapels Services and the Contextualization of the Gospel:

- How principles in Acts 17:16-34 for the contextualization in the Gospel can assist leaders in planning culturally relevant and engaging chapel services –

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A study of Acts 17:16-34, this paper focuses on the strategies used by the apostle Paul to communicate the Gospel to audiences with minimal or no acquaintance with Christianity. Specific attention is given to the ways Paul varied his preaching techniques to take into account his listeners' non-Christian backgrounds. Chapel services at Shokei Gakuin University (Miyagi, Japan), in particular, are briefly examined. The paper concludes with several ways in which contemporary Christian leaders can utilize Pauline contextualization principles university chapel services.

Keywords : Contextualization, University, Chapel, Areopagus, Mars Hill

### **The role of chapel at Shokei Gakuin University (SGU)**

At SGU, the chapel service held twice a week “bears an extremely important responsibility for the promotion of Christian education [on campus]” and, similarly, “is where the foundation for the schools Christian education is established.”<sup>i</sup> So central to the overall function of the school is the chapel that most administration offices are temporarily closed during the chapel time, and, generally speaking, classes are not held during this time. In addition to the critical place that the chapel occupies in the overall goal of Christian education at SGU, the chapel is also one of the primary vehicles through which the school seeks to sustain its Christian identity and stay rooted to the schools founding principle’s as laid out by Annie Buzzel and Lavinia Mead in 1892 when Shokei Christian Girl’s School was first established. (*Shokei Christian Girl’s School later became Shokei Gakuin.*)

SGU has a rich history of chapels (and on-campus Bible studies) that resonated with many of the students and, at times, even provided the kind of theological and philosophical foundational training that led some to become Christian leaders at the global level (e.g. Sakuzo Yoshino and his work with Taisho Democracy). It is the author’s opinion however, that the kind of Christian teaching in chapels that exerted significant influence and ignited a sense of passion and excitement among its listeners in the past has diminished significantly and the Christian spirit at SGU today is not at its full potential. The SGU Christian spirit could be better described as

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*surviving* rather than *thriving*. On the other hand, however, the style and atmosphere of SGU encourages innovation and experimentation. This openness to innovation and experimentation on many fronts is why the author is enthusiastic about SGU's potential to strengthen the Christian influence beyond its current state. One of the primary vehicles through which this can be done is the chapel service since this is the most frequent Christian event on campus, and also the highest attended. For steps to how the chapel service can be renewed and help revitalize the on-campus Christian influence, Paul's speech in Acts 17:16-34 provides Gospel contextualization and missional principles that can serve as a blueprint for planning chapels at SGU that are engaging and influential for 18-19 year-old college students.

### **Paul, Contextualization, and College Chapels**

Planning chapel services that engage students requires a willingness to quickly innovate and keep up with the fast-changing culture of college students. One important challenge for Christian universities should be learning how to plan chapel services that are culturally current and relevant for college students without compromising, altering, or neglecting the Gospel message.

### **The Problem**

It is the author's contention that current efforts to plan engaging chapel services are, however sincere, unsuccessful largely due to the misguided assumption that what engaged 18 year-olds in the 1980's and 1990's is also what engages and motivates 18 year-olds in 2015. What was a perfect vehicle for teaching and preaching the Gospel in the 1980's is not necessarily the best vehicle for doing so in 2015. The challenge for chapel planners and speakers becomes learning how to preach the orthodox Gospel in a way that best fits with the communication medium(s) of the listeners. As Pastor Mark Driscoll has remarked, we must learn to teach "Timeless truths in timely ways."<sup>ii</sup>

### **Athens: The Pluralistic and Polytheistic Religious Setting of Acts 17:16-34**

Athens was a city exposed to a regular flow of new deities and developed a remarkable tolerance for foreign divinities.<sup>iii</sup> By the time Paul had arrived, Athens was "a city rife with pagan images, temples, sanctuaries, and altars."<sup>iv</sup> For example, the *Agora* (about 200 x 250 meters), i.e., the marketplace where part of Acts 17:16-34 takes place, was surrounded on all four sides by buildings which contained statues, temples, sanctuaries, and altars dedicated to various gods, goddesses, and deities.<sup>v</sup> The Stoa Poikile was "a popular meeting place for discussions and cultural activities"<sup>vi</sup> and attracted philosophers, making philosophical discussions a normal part of the Agora landscape.<sup>vii</sup>

## **The Athenian Audience**

### **1) Epicureans**

Epicureans argued that “the gods did not live in temples that men had built.”<sup>viii</sup> The Epicureans “rejected the [religious] superstition of their contemporaries” and were concerned about the cultic practices that demeaned gods.<sup>ix</sup> Epicureans also rejected the idea of making sacrifices to the gods since they believed that these gods did not need any sacrifices from humans. Additionally, Epicureans were confident that knowledge of God could be attained through the proper use of human reason.<sup>x</sup>

The Epicurean philosophy of life excluded the possibility of life after death. Flemming writes that “Epicureans were committed to a practical ethical system that valued pleasure as the highest good...and believed that the soul died with the body and that the gods, who were material in essence, played no significant role in the lives of the people.”<sup>xi</sup>

In contrast, the message preached by Paul on Mars Hill explained that God is active in the events of the world. Epicureanism has been described as a “philosoph[y] of despair and cynicism”<sup>xii</sup> because, according to its worldview, the gods had no interest in, or influence on human affairs and “the world was due to chance, a random concourse of atoms.”<sup>xiii</sup>

### **2) Stoics**

Stoics stated that the gods were immortal, and that they ruled the world by providence, a point “that could be proved from the divine wisdom and power, from the nature of the world, from the miracles of nature and from the gods’ care for human beings.”<sup>xiv</sup> The Stoic view of the gods reflected a pantheistic concept of divinity and not a personal God of whom Paul spoke.<sup>xv</sup> “The Stoics were essentially pantheists, believing that a divine principle of reason was present in all things and governed all things.”<sup>xvi</sup> Stoics sought to live their lives “in harmony with this [divine and] rational principle, and, thus, according to nature.”<sup>xvii</sup>

### **3) The Areopagus Council**

The Areopagus council was the supreme governing body in Athens for deciding religious issues.<sup>xviii</sup> While not holding a significant degree of legal power, nevertheless, members of the Areopagus council were “guardians of the city’s religion, morals and education.”<sup>xix</sup> One must be careful to not overestimate the political or legal power of the members of the Areopagus council. However, their special status in the Athenian society is apparent from the fact that they were the final arbiters regarding whether Paul could continue to preach his message.

## **Paul’s Use of Contextualization**

Paul’s approach toward evangelism in this section of Acts has been referred to as “contextualization”, i.e. “the never-changing word of God in ever-changing modes of relevance. [Contextualization] is making...gospel concepts or ideals relevant in a given situation.”<sup>xx</sup> *Contextualization* is the “the process whereby Christians adapt the forms, content, and praxis of the Christian faith so as to communicate it to the minds and hearts of people with other cultural backgrounds. The goal is to make the Christian faith *as a whole* — not only the message

but also the means of living out our faith in the local setting — understandable.”<sup>xxi</sup>

The following discussion will focus on certain aspects of Paul's speech which relate to the issue of contextualization.

### 1) Observing Athens

Paul's astute observations and keen awareness of the spiritual background of his audience in Athens together constitute a core part of Paul's mission strategy. Before Paul begins preaching to the Athenians, he takes time to observe and study the city of Athens. While verses 16 and 23 show Paul to be a man with an unwavering focus and dedication to missions, it does not depict Paul as a person oblivious to and ignorant of the social, cultural, and religious background of his surroundings. Paul is not portrayed as a person who runs into a situation blind and delivers his message with no consideration of the possible cultural or intellectual barriers that might hinder the receptivity or even comprehension of his message. What it does show is Paul doing his best to assimilate himself into the situation by making the effort to understand the worldview of his audience as much as possible. Regarding what Paul “saw”, Campbell writes that Paul “did not just ‘notice’ the idols. He looked and looked, and thought and thought...Paul's skill was seen in making considered observation and then reflecting on the implications for Athenians spirituality.”<sup>xxii</sup> Verse 23 demonstrates that Paul was not just a casual tourist but that as he walked through the town he studied the culture, keenly observing characteristics of the city that would provide him with additional insight into the spiritual and religious aspects of the culture.

That Paul first took the time to learn about his audience and their city before engaging them in debate and discussion is significant. As Campbell has remarked, the order of Paul's actions is important: “He saw, he felt, he spoke.”<sup>xxiii</sup> Paul was a missionary, but he was also a student of culture. Luke considers Paul's astute observations and his study of the city an important foundation for his subsequent discourse with the Athenians.

Paul, of all people, with his strong childhood education, would have recognized the city's rich philosophical tradition, intellectual independence, literature and art, notable achievements in the cause of human liberty, and the splendid architecture. Perhaps having heard about the great city of Athens since his childhood, all of these might well have been spellbinding for him. However, Paul is not recorded as being captivated by these particular elements of beauty and culture. While hardly blind to the city's great monuments, Paul saw in Athens a city submerged in idols.<sup>xxiv</sup> The city was full of idols to the point that it was said that “[n]o city has ever seen such a forest of states as studded as the marketplace, the streets and the sides and summit of the Acropolis of Athens.”<sup>xxv</sup> The Greek term used here to describe Paul's distress is “*paroxyneto*”, which can mean “distress” or “provoked.” It is the same word used in the Old Testament to describe God's anger against idolatry (Isaiah 65:3, Hos. 8:5).<sup>xxvi</sup> However, Paul's great distress at the spiritual condition of Athens did not mean that he immediately became outwardly hostile to the anti-Christian culture of the city. We see that his deep distress (v.16) is balanced with a patient effort to find and establish common ground with his Athenian audience.

### 2) Establishing common ground with the Athenians: Finding a useful point of contact

The purpose of Paul's opening words to the Areopagus council were to establish common

ground with his listeners. In spite of his intense distress and anger concerning the situation, his emotions did not lead him to rush in and denounce every aspect of their religious culture, and immediately proceed to start proclaiming the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Had Paul encountered a group of self-professing believers worshipping idols, one might have expected him to begin his speech with extremely harsh and straightforward words. It certainly was not contrary to Paul's character to outright denounce certain things when called for by the situation (Acts 13:11). However, in the Athenian context, Paul displays patience and a communication style that serves to strategically build a bridge between himself and his listeners. Through first establishing common ground with his listeners, Paul increased his chances of receiving a sympathetic hearing. Paul is not looking down or disparaging his audience; rather, he is taking a patient and humble attitude by actually affirming areas of the Athenian culture that seem to exhibit some overlap with biblical truth. In fact, verse 22 comes close to actually implying Paul's respect for the spirituality of the Athenians. The Greek word for "religious" that Paul uses here is "*deisidaimonesterous*". This word can carry with it a complimentary or derogatory sense.<sup>xxvii</sup> One might wonder how Paul could be deeply distressed and still speak to the Athenians with words that could potentially be interpreted as condoning idol worship. Paul's ultimate goal is to challenge his listeners to turn from their current ways of idol worship and repent. However, in order to get to that point of challenging his listeners to repent, Paul must first be accepted by them as a speaker. Paul found it helpful to first establish common ground with the Athenian audience by starting his conversation with themes and topics on which he and the listeners already agreed.

### 3) Paul's use of local religion and the human quest for "something more"<sup>xxviii</sup>

One area in which Paul found common ground with the Athenian spirituality was on the topic of belief in the existence of reality beyond the material world. The Athenians, like Paul, believed that there was something more to life than just the material world (v.23). Paul saw this agreement on the presence of something beyond the material world as a meaningful entry point to a deeper discussion of religious truth.

Additionally, Paul's decision to first focus on the areas of agreement between himself and his polytheistic audience demonstrate that Paul was not diametrically opposed to *everything* in polytheism, nor did his attitude toward the polytheistic Athenians constitute a line in the sand that eliminated all potential commonalities between himself and others. C.S. Lewis's comments on the existence of religious common ground between Christians and non-Christians is worth noting. Lewis writes:

"The first big division of humanity is into the majority, who believe in some kind of God or gods, and the minority who do not. On this point Christianity lines up with the majority — lines up with ancient Greeks and Romans, modern savages, Stoics, Platonists, Hindus, Muslims, etc. against the modern Western European materialist."<sup>xxix</sup>

Michael Rogness echoes Lewis on this point: when it comes to those who believe in God or gods and those who don't, "[Christians] are on the same side as all these others — Hindus, Buddhists,

Muslims, Jews, and so on. In this ‘first big division’ they are on our [Christian’s] side, because they believe in something more. At that fundamental level [Christians] have more in common with a primitive African animist than [they] do with [their] neighbors up and down [their] street who live with no sense whatsoever of something bigger.”<sup>xxx</sup>

The altar to the unknown God (v.23), a symbol of the deep religiosity of the city and a source of distress for Paul is simultaneously a springboard to the proclamation of the Gospel. Paul could have started by telling the Athenians that they had it all wrong; but instead, Paul opens with a neutral phrase about the deep religiosity of the city based on his observation of the various altars of which the people in the city were very proud.

Paul’s reference to the altar of the unknown god was helpful in ways beyond just establishing common ground with his listeners. The inclusion of local philosophies and religion into his speech enabled him to “attract the attention of his listeners, build a bridge with the audience, and *give Paul credibility in their eyes*” (Emphasis added by author.) Demonstrating his familiarity with the particular “unknown god” among the multitudes of idols scattered throughout the city helped bolster Paul’s credibility by showing Paul to be a “very observant, relevant, and knowledgeable fellow, especially if he knows the origin of [the altars to the unknown gods].”<sup>xxxi</sup>

#### 4) Paul’s use of local poets

Paul used extrabiblical material drawn from the works of locally known poets<sup>xxxii</sup> (v.28) to build bridges to the minds and hearts of his audience. In referencing extrabiblical resources, Paul’s purpose was not the syncretization of the Gospel message with polytheism or pantheism. Rather, his “deeper purpose was to confront and correct [his audiences’] understanding of God...not by overly attacking specific pagan doctrines, but rather by positively confessing the God of the Scriptures.”<sup>xxxiii</sup> For Paul, the sources that were most appropriate for this deeper purpose included two quotes from Greek poets (v.28). Paul was not denying their philosophy; rather, he was “demonstrat[ing] that [their philosophy] did not go far enough.”<sup>xxxiv</sup> Paul’s use of poets already familiar to his audience displayed his commitment to use the language and assumptions held by his audience so that his message might be understood and accepted by as many people as possible. Had Paul begun by quoting the OT and other Jewish traditions and prophets, his proclamation would appear quite irrelevant to the Athenians who were not versed or educated in that background. Ben Witherington III writes:

“From a rhetorical point of view the function of the [...] quotations here is to cite an authority recognized by one’s audience to support one’s point. It would have done Paul no good to simply quote Scripture, a book the audience did not know and one that had no authority in the minds of these hearers. Arguments are only persuasive if they work within the plausibility structure existing in the minds of the hearers.”<sup>xxxv</sup>

At the same time, OT imagery or teaching cannot be missed to someone familiar with the OT. Paul brilliantly “selects from the Old Testament and Jewish theological and apologetic traditions such motif that could be immediately understood by the Stoic and Epicurean philosophers, including terminological allusions and quotations”<sup>xxxvi</sup> and draws on ideas and quotes from local

poets to substantiate his claims.

### **Concluding Remarks about Establishing Common Ground**

Paying attention to how Paul began his speech in Athens over 2000 years ago can help SGU chapel speakers today build bridges with their audiences as well. Bluntly denying their worldview “might be accurate but it would be a terrible way to start.”<sup>xxxvii</sup> Paul chose to begin by focusing on beliefs both parties shared (i.e. the existence of the realm of the divine.) If all SGU chapel speakers (and planners) realized that part of their responsibility is learning about the culture(s) and worldviews of the student body well enough to find multiple areas of common ground that can serve as material for building bridges to people’s hearts and minds, the content of the chapel would be much more engaging and relevant to the students, thus giving the Gospel message a better chance of being heard and influential to the listeners.

### **Challenging the Culture**

Paul’s efforts at bridge-building were not without limits. Identifying with his audience went insofar as much the bridge-building didn’t necessitate altering the essence of the Gospel message. Paul’s message about the Gospel of Jesus Christ eventually diverged from the polytheistic and pantheistic spirituality of the Athenians (v.24).

#### **1) Contending with the Stoic view of God**

In verse 24 Paul challenged the philosophy of the Stoics on many fronts. First, the apostle argued for a personal God who is separate from creation but who nevertheless cares for it. This statement about God ran contrary to the Stoics’ view of god as an “all pervasive and impersonal *logos*.”<sup>xxxviii</sup> Paul’s assault on Stoic philosophy continued with his charge that the Athenians were insufficient in their knowledge about God. Even though many in the audience, socially speaking, would have been members of a well-educated and sophisticated elite, the primary thrust of Paul’s message was still that they were ignorant and that the supremacy of their human reason would not lead to the self-sufficiency and perfection they imagined.<sup>xxxix</sup> Thus, Paul called them to repent of their ignorance and look beyond themselves to God.

#### **2) Contending with the Epicurean view of God**

Paul also challenged the Epicurean belief that god was blissfully detached from humanity. Paul spoke of God as “actively and intimately involved in the world.”<sup>xl</sup> Challenging the Epicurean view that the ultimate purpose of life is to pursue individual pleasure (“since in the end everything is due to chance”<sup>xli</sup>), Paul proclaimed the need for repentance because God is the providential ruler and people will be held accountable for their actions.

#### **3) A Challenge to Repentance, not an Effort for Syncretism**

Paul’s actions here are not syncretistic since he continuously attacks the elements that clash with the biblical worldview. By this Paul demonstrates that his ultimate goal is not a kind of harmonization or syncretizing of beliefs, but the proclamation of the Christian Gospel message, even if that runs the risk of inciting serious social tension between him and his listeners. Tension

might well be expected in this process. As Campbell has aptly remarked, the gospel will never fit neatly into one language, culture, or country but when preached properly, will not fail to provoke change and transformation among the listeners.<sup>xlii</sup> In verse 29 we see Paul facing, head-on, the reality that “no smooth path is laid out over which thoroughly pagan religious sensibilities and the church’s witness to Christ could travel side by side without serious tension.”<sup>xliii</sup>

Paul’s ultimate goal is for his audience to acquire a proper understanding of the past and future work of Jesus Christ, i.e., an understanding that will lead them away from idol worship and toward repentance and worship of God. The call to repentance in verses 30-31 is based on Paul’s assertion of the “end-time judgement and the resurrection of Christ, both of which pose a firm challenge to Greek thought [since the] concept of a divine judgement at the end of history subverts the Stoic picture of the cosmos moving perpetually in cycles.”<sup>xliv</sup> Paul is not just trying here to make his claim understood, to pique the Athenians’ interest or curiosity, or to reconcile Christianity with the local Greco-Roman philosophy. Paul’s ultimate purpose here is to “*confront* (emphasis added) and correct the Athenians understanding of God at a fundamental level.”<sup>xlv</sup> Paul’s speech is not simply a call for the listeners to gain more knowledge but a strong plea for the “conversion of their worldview.”<sup>xlvi</sup> The need for a worldview transformation was a significant part of Paul’s preaching and should not be overlooked. “Luke sees repentance not only as a change of thinking but also as an intentional action-oriented forsaking of sins which are forgiven by God as a result.”<sup>xlvii</sup> Given the intellectual history of the Athenians, Paul’s subtle but clear accusation of Athenian ignorance would have been a bold statement and his call for the Athenians to turn from ignorance would have demonstrated that Paul was not seeking primarily to gain the approval of the Areopagus council or the masses. In short, Paul was telling them that their ignorance was no longer bliss and they had a choice to make that would have afterlife consequences.

Today, repentance can be often understood as simply being sorry for some wrong that a person does. However, the “repentance” for which Paul calls constitutes an entirely new worldview, way of life, philosophy, and living style, all of which Paul is using to challenge his Greek listeners.

The magnitude of the choice that Athenians are called to make is brought out well by Eckhard Schnabel who writes that Paul “establishes the necessity of changing religious convictions and cultic activities in view of divine judgment by a man.”<sup>xlviii</sup> F. F. Bruce points out the drastic nature of Paul’s challenge when he states that “[t]he eschatological judgement as announced in the Bible would have been irrelevant in the Greek mindset and it would have been unheard of that one man would have been exalted to the role of universal judge.”<sup>xlvix</sup>

### **The Paucity of Direct References to Jesus Christ**

That Paul makes no specific reference to Jesus Christ in this speech would not go unnoticed by most Christians. One might initially think that Paul went a little too far in the direction of religious syncretism in the name of contextualization and culturally relevant evangelism, thus resulting in a watered down Gospel. John Stott disagrees with those who have even written that



Paul probably “forgot” to proclaim “Christ crucified” (1 Corinthians 2:1-2),<sup>i</sup> and Flemming also argues against this notion that Paul was watering down the Gospel and that Paul’s message was “a sellout of the straightforward gospel of ‘Christ crucified’.”<sup>ii</sup> Several critics of Paul’s speech on Mars Hill have cited 1 Corinthians 2:1-2 as evidence that Paul was disappointed with himself for not mentioning “Christ crucified” during his Mars Hill speech. However, like a majority of scholars who reject the notion that Paul made a mistake, Flemming writes that the text does not support the argument that Paul was ever disappointed in himself over the way he preached on Mars Hill. Most modern commentators agree that 2 Corinthians 2:1-2 is written against an entirely different backdrop than the one with which Paul was working in Athens: thus in 1 Corinthians 2:1-2, “Paul is not reacting to his poor results in Athens, but rather drawing a contrast between his gospel and the worldly wisdom of the Corinthians.”<sup>iii</sup> Flemming continues: “[a]ll indications are that Luke regards the Mars Hill speech not as a failure or as some kind of temporary experiment, but rather as a model of missionary preaching to an educated pagan audience.”<sup>iiii</sup>

The contrast between Paul’s speech on Mars Hill and other recorded NT speeches or letters of his is stark. During his Mars Hill discourse, the scope of Paul’s speech was constrained by the biblical illiteracy of his audience. This likely played a significant, if not primary, role in his decision to use the local language or to leave out certain themes in his discourse. In fact, the omission of any specific reference to Jesus Christ as a crucified Savior during his Areopagus speech was most likely intentional, not incidental. Any effort by Paul to adequately explain specifically the work, role, and life of Jesus Christ apart from at least a minimal understanding of Old Testament literature (which most of the Athenians did not possess) would have been futile. This is perhaps why Paul chose not to develop a detailed discourse on Jesus Christ and instead made a simple fleeting reference to a man that will “judge” the world in righteousness (v.31).

It is important to recognize, however, the lack of specific references by Paul to OT or NT scripture does not in any way suggest that Paul neglected scriptural thought. In fact, the entire discourse is heavily laden with OT *concepts* of God. Furthermore, a close look at his speech will show Paul was actually teaching OT theology without directly quoting or mentioning anything from the OT. Paul’s focus on OT concepts in his speech, with a brief allusion to the work of Jesus Christ at the end, was not only the result of his awareness of the biblical illiteracy of his listeners, but also a logical strategy for interacting with his audience on his terms. On this point, K. Hacker writes:

“[T]he life and ministry of Jesus can be understood only in the context of the presuppositions of the biblical witness concerning *God*. This is the reason why the pioneer preaching before pagans who have not been exposed to biblical influences is essentially preaching about *God*. The fact that Jesus constitutes the path to God does not mean that it is Christology that opens the way to theology. God as Creator and Lord, humankind created in the image of God (God as Father), the prohibition of images: the unprepared pagans first need to hear the Old Testament foundations of the New Testament.”<sup>liv</sup>

Paul's rather ingenious way of introducing Jesus and OT teaching without making direct references to Jesus or the OT ends up showing that the work of God and the role of the "judge" are impossible to separate. Paul's speech recognizes that the eternal destiny of the "world" will be determined by a judge who judges according to righteousness. While the name of Jesus might not appear in the speech, Paul warns that the eternal destiny of the "world" will be determined by a judge who judges according to righteousness, thus it is hard to miss the apostle's implicit references to the doctrine of sin, judgement, and forgiveness that are centered on the work of Christ. This point is expressed well by Schnabel who writes:

"At the end of Paul's Areopagus speech, his conviction becomes obvious that people who approach God, the one true God, also approach Jesus... If God demands that all people...render the account of their life on the day of judgment before Jesus the Judge, it is ultimately impossible to distinguish between God's action and the action of Jesus. The reference to the resurrection of the Judge whom God has appointed to judge the world alludes to the significance and to the centrality speech of Jesus."<sup>lv</sup>

### **Practical Applications: Contextualizing the Gospel in University Chapel Settings**

A desire to see a better harvest has (or, *should*) drive such leaders at Christian colleges to look for more effective ways to share the Gospel message with the particular students under their care. In the following section let us take a look at how lessons from Paul's Mars Hill speech could aid contemporary Christian leaders in learning to contextualize the Gospel message for their particular audience.

#### **1) Spend Time Learning and Observing Your Audience**

Paul's efforts to learn about the surrounding culture and background of Athens would be the modern equivalent of "unearthing partial truths about God from [our contemporary] culture's film, music, comedy, sports, literature, theater, philosophy, economics, medicine, or politics and working from those truths to the truth of Jesus as the ultimate answer to all human questions and cultural problems."<sup>lvi</sup> In order to do this, Christian university leaders must be being willing to devote a significant amount of time, money, and energy to observing and learning these aspects of their campus culture. Additionally, chapel speakers must constantly be evaluating the *way* he/she preaches just as much as the content of his/her sermon. For example, no contemporary evangelist would think of using a 2000 year old altar to an "unknown god" as a means to demonstrate his/her familiarity with a local contemporary culture (unless that particular culture still highly venerated an altar to an unknown god). Similarly, given the many negative connotations that are associated today with the word "religious", very few people, if any, would attempt to gain a hearing from an audience by opening their address with a compliment on the people's high level of "religiosity." The vast difference between the Athenian culture of 2000 years ago and SGU in 2015 is not hard to identify. Thus it is not difficult to understand why one would choose a different *method* than Paul chose, even when teaching the same message.

However, distinguishing the culture of 18-19 year old college students from of older Christian workers may be more difficult to identify and subsequently bridge than one realizes. Getting a birds-eye view of these student's value systems, thoughts, dreams, and interests, is an important step for Christian leaders to make in order to understand the mindset of the audience in which their message will be heard. In order to gain such a view, leaders might try reading (with a particular focus on the ads) a teen or young adult magazine that they might not normally pick up. A philosophy teacher might consider picking up a copy of the fashion magazine *Non-no* which can be found at any convenient store. Listening to contemporary music (and especially the lyrics) can be extremely helpful in gaining insight into the values and trends of a culture. After spending a considerable amount of time "observing" the culture around them, leaders might concentrate on answering following questions.

- 1) Where do students spend their time and money?
- 2) What do students do during their free time?
- 3) What do students fear?
- 4) What do students dream about?
- 5) Where do students shop?
- 6) What cultural experiences do students value?
- 7) What are the most painful experiences students have had?
- 8) What music do students listen to?
- 9) What film and television do students watch?
- 10) What do students find humorous?
- 11) What do students read?
- 12) What is students' spirituality?
- 13) Whom do students trust? Why?
- 14) What sins will the gospel confront first and heal for students?<sup>lvii</sup>

### **Bridge-Building through the Contextualization of Chapel Music**

Musical styles and lyrics that spoke to the immediate needs, interests, and concerns of college-age students during the 1960's are rarely the same styles and lyrics that can speak to and potentially strongly influence college age students in 2015. One widely used hymn book at SGU and many other college chapels in Japan is the *Sanbika 21*. The hymns in this book are based on a familiarity with music printed page, an appreciation for 16<sup>th</sup> century music, and a culture that, generally speaking, embraced Christianity.<sup>lviii</sup> Recently however, the printed page is increasingly giving way to the electronic screen as music is experienced more and more through electronic sound and images, and not only the melody and lyrics.<sup>lix</sup> Unlike people in the reformation, most students at SGU today have not grown up immersed, or even exposed to Christian ideas or phrases such as "I Raise my Ebenezer", "marching onto Zion", or "washed in the blood of the lamb".

Effective contextualizing of music requires that chapel planners first have a basic understanding

of the music culture of their listeners. Question #8 is a good way to start the process of understanding the music culture of a particular audience. However, a chapel music planner can come to an even more thorough understanding of the kind of contextualization necessary through considering additional questions about his audiences' musical culture. For example, through what styles of music can the listeners best express themselves? What are the distinctive characteristics of that music? The goal in answering these questions is to be able to identify the "heart-language and heart-music of those who participate"<sup>lx</sup> i.e., the language and style of expression that is most native and natural to those assembled. The more a worship service strays from the normal thinking and singing patterns of the congregation, the more likely the attendees will be to see Christianity as something foreign and unrelated to their own situation. Daniel Benedict highlights the importance of using music that is familiar and in-synch with the people attending the service:

"You have undoubtedly observed persons for whom English was a second language break into their 'native' tongue. The speech just poured out. It was animated and clearly a release of natural energy that was not evident when speaking the 'foreign' language. It was their language of the heart, the language in which their emotions could flow along with their cognitive expression."<sup>lxi</sup>

Paul brought the Gospel message to the Athenians by speaking in the language they most naturally used, utilizing the philosophical beliefs with which they were most familiar, and displaying an understanding of the value system that his listeners accepted as authoritative. Paul made the effort to understand the Athenian's heart-language and, as much as possible, did what he needed to do to learn how to express the Gospel using the particular terms of that heart-language. Similarly, anyone selecting music for worship must understand that "music and language that do not recognize and release worshipers to hear and to express themselves in their heart-language fail to welcome them."<sup>lxii</sup>

One of the central questions for selecting properly contextualized music for chapels becomes: *Can the existing worship service music be expanded to "sound" in the heart-language of the people assembled so that a broader range of students can hear and sing in their heart-language?*<sup>lxiii</sup>

Next, one must consider *how* innovation and the incorporation of new music could be used to broaden the impact of the service. However, as always, one must take a critical approach when introducing new songs and styles of music. For example, in an age in which individualism tends to trump communalism, the author of this paper feels that the general direction of congregational singing should have an emphasis on the community rather than on the individual. Therefore, songs like *The Air I Breathe* and *Draw Me Close*, that focus almost exclusively on Jesus and the individual worshipper should be used with caution since they could promote an unbalanced view of the Christian life.<sup>lxiv</sup>

## 2) Challenging People to an "Experiment of Faith"

A large part of Paul's speech was building bridges to people's minds and hearts and then

proceeding to lay down the theological foundation for the climax of his speech, i.e. the need for people to repent.

Reaching people in a meaningful and long-lasting way with the Gospel message “necessarily involves a process, which takes place in *stages, over time*.”<sup>lxv</sup> A critical part of the process can simply be stimulating people’s interest in the Bible itself. Paul was able to pique the interest of his hearers, which then lead them to want to hear more. Similarly, a chapel speaker might find students wanting to hear more if the authority of the Bible could be more firmly established. To this extent, chapel speakers might invite listeners to conduct an “experiment of faith;” For example, the planners could invite the listeners to “connect the wisdom of the Bible” to a particular area of their [lives], like their friendships, studies, etc., Hopefully, as they apply the wisdom from Scripture, they may learn to trust Scripture, thereby overcoming a significant barrier to worship. It must be emphasized however, that it is extremely important that the truth the listeners are asked to apply for a season be properly and thoroughly explained, lest the listeners misunderstand the passage, apply it inadequately, and develop an antagonistic view of Scripture.<sup>lxvi</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Every aspect of a worship service should be contextualized to best fit the culture of the hearers while not compromising the Good News. The process of contextualizing university chapel services in Japan will require leaders to cultivate their minds to think deep and critically about the current way of planning worship services and show the type of flexibility toward evangelism that Paul displayed on Mars Hill. As Christian leaders seek to contextualize their services for college age students, there will likely be big and small changes that need to be made. The cost of making those changes can be high, but the cost of not making those changes is higher.

It is the authors hope that all Christians college leaders particularly will take the issue of contextualization seriously and approach the format, music, speaking topics, speaking lengths, etc., of their chapel services with an open mind and willingness to make the critical changes and updates so that they can more effectively teach the unchanging and timeless Good News of Jesus Christ to the generation of college students placed in their care.

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<sup>i</sup> Kobayashi, Takao. Shokei Gakuin University Newsletter: *A Request for Cooperation and the Promotion of Christian Education*. (April 2013).

<sup>ii</sup> Driscoll, Mark. *The Radical Reformission: Reaching Out Without Selling Out*. (Grand Rapids, Zondervan 2004), 24.

<sup>iii</sup> Dunham, “*Acts: 17:16-34*,” 202.

<sup>iv</sup> Flemming, Dean. “Contextualizing the Gospel in Athens: Paul’s Areopagus Address as a Paradigm for Missionary Communication.” (*Missiology: An International Review* XXX, no. 2 (April 2002). *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials, EBSCOhost*), 200.

<sup>v</sup> Eckhard J, Schnabel. “Contextualizing Paul in Athens: the proclamation of the gospel before pagan audiences in the Greco-Roman world.” (*Religion & Theology/Religion & theology* 12, no.2 (2005). *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials, EBSCOhost*), 172-173.

<sup>vi</sup> *Ibid.*, 173.

- vii Ibid., 174.
- viii Ibid., 180.
- vx Ibid., 180.
- x Ibid., 180.
- xi Flemming, “Contextualizing Paul in Athens: the proclamation of the gospel before pagan audiences in the Greco-Roman world,” 200.
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- xiv Schnabel, “Contextualizing Paul in Athens: the proclamation of the gospel before pagan audiences in the Greco-Roman world,” 179-180.
- xv Ibid., 179.
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- xxvii Appleby, Paul on Mars Hill, 23.
- xxviii Rogness, Michael. “Proclaiming the Gospel on Mars Hill.” (*Word and World* 27, no 3 Sum (2007). *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials, EBSCOhost*), 277.
- xxix Lewis, C.S., *Mere Christianity* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1952) 29.
- xxx Ibid., 278.
- xxxi Appleby, *Paul on Mars Hill*, 23.
- xxxii (v.28) “In him we live and move and have our being” is attributed to the Cretan poet Eimenides  
“For we too are his offspring” is from the Cilician poet Aratus, who wrote that “It is with Zeus that every one of us in every way has to do, for we are also his offspring.”
- xxxiii Flemming, “*Contextualizing the Gospel in Athens: Paul’s Areopagus address as a paradigm for missionary communication*,” 204.
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- xxxv Witherington, Benn III. *The Acts Of The Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1998), 530.
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- lxiii Ibid., 12.
- lxiv For a more detailed discussion and balanced view of how to evaluate and select contemporary worship songs, see 1) *Reaching Out without Dumbing Down*, by Marva J. Dawn; (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995.) and 2) *Contemporary Worship Music: A Biblical Defense* by John M. Frame. Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1997)
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